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Michael Parenti: Afghanistan, Another Untold Story

Roundup: Media's Take

[Michael Parenti's recent books are Contrary Notions: The Michael Parenti Reader and the forthcoming God and His Demons. For further information, visit www.michaelparenti.org.]

Barack Obama is on record as advocating a military escalation in Afghanistan. Before sinking any deeper into that quagmire, we might do well to learn something about recent Afghan history and the role played by the United States.

Less than a month after the 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, US leaders began an all-out aerial assault upon Afghanistan, the country purportedly harboring Osama bin Laden and his al Qaeda terrorist organization. More than twenty years earlier, in 1980, the United States intervened to stop a Soviet "invasion" of that country. Even some leading progressive writers, who normally take a more critical view of US policy abroad, treated the US intervention against the Soviet-supported government as "a good thing." The actual story is not such a good thing.

Some Real History

Since feudal times the landholding system in Afghanistan had remained unchanged, with more than 75 percent of the land owned by big landlords who comprised only 3 percent of the rural population. In the mid-1960s, democratic revolutionary elements coalesced to form the People's Democratic Party (PDP). In 1973, the king was deposed, but the government that replaced him proved to be autocratic, corrupt, and unpopular. It in turn was forced out in 1978 after a massive demonstration in front of the presidential palace, and after the army intervened on the side of the demonstrators.

The military officers who took charge invited the PDP to form a new government under the leadership of Noor Mohammed Taraki, a poet and novelist. This is how a Marxist-led coalition of national democratic forces came into office. “It was a totally indigenous happening. Not even the CIA blamed the USSR for it,” writes John Ryan, a retired professor at the University of Winnipeg, who was conducting an agricultural research project in Afghanistan at about that time.

The Taraki government proceeded to legalize labor unions, and set up a minimum wage, a progressive income tax, a literacy campaign, and programs that gave ordinary people greater access to health care, housing, and public sanitation. Fledgling peasant cooperatives were started and price reductions on some key foods were imposed.

The government also continued a campaign begun by the king to emancipate women from their age-old tribal bondage. It provided public education for girls and for the children of various tribes.
A report in the San Francisco Chronicle (17 November 2001) noted that under the Taraki regime Kabul had been “a cosmopolitan city. Artists and hippies flocked to the capital. Women studied agriculture, engineering and business at the city’s university. Afghan women held government jobs—-in the 1980s, there were seven female members of parliament. Women drove cars, traveled and went on dates. Fifty percent of university students were women.”

The Taraki government moved to eradicate the cultivation of opium poppy. Until then Afghanistan had been producing more than 70 percent of the opium needed for the world’s heroin supply. The government also abolished all debts owed by farmers, and began developing a major land reform program. Ryan believes that it was a “genuinely popular government and people looked forward to the future with great hope.”

But serious opposition arose from several quarters. The feudal landlords opposed the land reform program that infringed on their holdings. And tribesmen and fundamentalist mullahs vehemently opposed the government’s dedication to gender equality and the education of women and children.

Because of its egalitarian and collectivist economic policies the Taraki government also incurred the opposition of the US national security state. Almost immediately after the PDP coalition came to power, the CIA, assisted by Saudi and Pakistani military, launched a large scale intervention into Afghanistan on the side of the ousted feudal lords, reactionary tribal chieftains, mullahs, and opium traffickers.

A top official within the Taraki government was Hafizulla Amin, believed by many to have been recruited by the CIA during the several years he spent in the United States as a student. In September 1979, Amin seized state power in an armed coup. He executed Taraki, halted the reforms, and murdered, jailed, or exiled thousands of Taraki supporters as he moved toward establishing a fundamentalist Islamic state. But within two months, he was overthrown by PDP remnants including elements within the military.

It should be noted that all this happened before the Soviet military intervention. National security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski publicly admitted--months before Soviet troops entered the country--that the Carter administration was providing huge sums to Muslim extremists to subvert the reformist government. Part of that effort involved brutal attacks by the CIA-backed mujahideen against schools and teachers in rural areas.

In late 1979, the seriously besieged PDP government asked Moscow to send a contingent of troops to help ward off the mujahideen (Islamic guerrilla fighters) and foreign mercenaries, all recruited, financed, and well-armed by the CIA. The Soviets already had been sending aid for projects in mining, education, agriculture, and public health. Deploying troops represented a commitment of a more serious and politically dangerous sort. It took repeated requests from Kabul before Moscow agreed to intervene militarily.

Jihad and Taliban, CIA Style
The Soviet intervention was a golden opportunity for the CIA to transform the tribal resistance into a holy war, an Islamic

jihad to expel the godless communists from Afghanistan. Over the years the United States and Saudi Arabia expended about $40 billion on the war in Afghanistan. The CIA and its allies recruited, supplied, and trained almost 100,000 radical mujahideen from forty Muslim countries including Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Algeria, and Afghanistan itself. Among those who answered the call was Saudi-born millionaire right-winger Osama bin Laden and his cohorts.

After a long and unsuccessful war, the Soviets evacuated the country in February 1989. It is generally thought that the PDP Marxist government collapsed immediately after the Soviet departure. Actually, it retained enough popular support to fight on for another three years, outlasting the Soviet Union itself by a year.

Upon taking over Afghanistan, the mujahideen fell to fighting among themselves. They ravaged the cities, terrorized civilian populations, looted, staged mass executions, closed schools, raped thousands of women and girls, and reduced half of Kabul to rubble. In 2001 Amnesty International reported that the mujahideen used sexual assault as “a method of intimidating vanquished populations and rewarding soldiers.’”

Ruling the country gangster-style and looking for lucrative sources of income, the tribes ordered farmers to plant opium poppy. The Pakistani ISI, a close junior partner to the CIA, set up hundreds of heroin laboratories across Afghanistan. Within two years of the CIA’s arrival, the Pakistan-Afghanistan borderland became the biggest producer of heroin in the world.

Largely created and funded by the CIA, the mujahideen mercenaries now took on a life of their own. Hundreds of them returned home to Algeria, Chechnya, Kosovo, and Kashmir to carry on terrorist attacks in Allah’s name against the purveyors of secular “corruption.”

In Afghanistan itself, by 1995 an extremist strain of Sunni Islam called the Taliban---heavily funded and advised by the ISI and the CIA and with the support of Islamic political parties in Pakistan---fought its way to power, taking over most of the country, luring many tribal chiefs into its fold with threats and bribes.

The Taliban promised to end the factional fighting and banditry that was the mujahideen trademark. Suspected murderers and spies were executed monthly in the sports stadium, and those accused of thievery had the offending hand sliced off. The Taliban condemned forms of “immorality” that included premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality. They also outlawed all music, theater, libraries, literature, secular education, and much scientific research.

The Taliban unleashed a religious reign of terror, imposing an even stricter interpretation of Muslim law than used by most of the Kabul clergy. All men were required to wear untrimmed beards and women had to wear the burqa which covered them from head to toe, including their faces. Persons who were slow to comply were dealt swift and severe punishment by the Ministry of Virtue. A woman who fled an abusive home or charged spousal abuse would herself be severely whipped by the theocratic authorities. Women were outlawed from social life, deprived of most forms of medical care, barred from all levels of education, and any opportunity to work outside the home. Women who were deemed “immoral” were stoned to death or buried alive.

None of this was of much concern to leaders in Washington who got along famously with the Taliban. As recently as 1999, the US government was paying the entire annual salary of every single Taliban government official. Not until October 2001, when President George W. Bush had to rally public opinion behind his bombing campaign in Afghanistan did he denounce the Taliban’s oppression of women. His wife, Laura Bush, emerged overnight as a full-blown feminist to deliver a public address detailing some of the abuses committed against Afghan women.

If anything positive can be said about the Taliban, it is that they did put a stop to much of the looting, raping, and random killings that the mujahideen had practiced on a regular basis. In 2000 Taliban authorities also eradicated the cultivation of opium poppy throughout the areas under their control, an effort judged by the United Nations International Drug Control Program to have been nearly totally successful. With the Taliban overthrown and a Western-selected mujahideen

government reinstalled in Kabul by December 2001, opium poppy production in Afghanistan increased dramatically.

The years of war that have followed have taken tens of thousands of Afghani lives. Along with those killed by Cruise missiles, Stealth bombers, Tomahawks, daisy cutters, and land mines are those who continue to die of hunger, cold, lack of shelter, and lack of water.

The Holy Crusade for Oil and Gas

While claiming to be fighting terrorism, US leaders have found other compelling but less advertised reasons for plunging deeper into Afghanistan. The Central Asian region is rich in oil and gas reserves. A decade before 9/11, Time magazine (18 March 1991) reported that US policy elites were contemplating a military presence in Central Asia. The discovery of vast oil and gas reserves in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan provided the lure, while the dissolution of the USSR removed the one major barrier against pursuing an aggressive interventionist policy in that part of the world.

US oil companies acquired the rights to some 75 percent of these new reserves. A major problem was how to transport the oil and gas from the landlocked region. US officials opposed using the Russian pipeline or the most direct route across Iran to the Persian Gulf. Instead, they and the corporate oil contractors explored a number of alternative pipeline routes, across Azerbaijan and Turkey to the Mediterranean or across China to the Pacific.

The route favored by Unocal, a US based oil company, crossed Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Indian Ocean. The intensive negotiations that Unocal entered into with the Taliban regime remained unresolved by 1998, as an Argentine company placed a competing bid for the pipeline. Bush's war against the Taliban rekindled UNOCAL's hopes for getting a major piece of the action.

Interestingly enough, neither the Clinton nor Bush administrations ever placed Afghanistan on the official State Department list of states charged with sponsoring terrorism, despite the acknowledged presence of Osama bin Laden as a guest of the Taliban government. Such a "rogue state" designation would have made it impossible for a US oil or construction company to enter an agreement with Kabul for a pipeline to the Central Asian oil and gas fields.

In sum, well in advance of the 9/11 attacks the US government had made preparations to move against the Taliban and create a compliant regime in Kabul and a direct US military presence in Central Asia. The 9/11 attacks provided the perfect impetus, stampeding US public opinion and reluctant allies into supporting military intervention.

One might agree with John Ryan who argued that if Washington had left the Marxist Taraki government alone back in 1979, "there would have been no army of mujahideen, no Soviet intervention, no war that destroyed Afghanistan, no Osama bin Laden, and no September 11 tragedy." But it would be asking too much for Washington to leave unmolested a progressive leftist government that was organizing the social capital around collective public needs rather than private accumulation.

US intervention in Afghanistan has proven not much different from US intervention in Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, and elsewhere. It had the same intent of preventing egalitarian social change, and the same effect of overthrowing an economically reformist government. In all these instances, the intervention brought retrograde elements into ascendance, left the economy in ruins, and pitilessly laid waste to many innocent lives.

The war against Afghanistan, a battered impoverished country, continues to be portrayed in US official circles as a gallant crusade against terrorism. If it ever was that, it also has been a means to other things: destroying a leftist revolutionary social order, gaining profitable control of one of the last vast untapped reserves of the earth's dwindling fossil fuel supply, and planting US bases and US military power into still another region of the world.

In the face of all this Obama's call for "change" rings hollow.

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Shaphan K MacKenzie - 12/8/2008

"US intervention in Afghanistan has proven not much different from US intervention in Cambodia, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia, Nicaragua, Grenada, Panama, and elsewhere. It had the same intent of preventing egalitarian social change, and the same effect of overthrowing an economically reformist government"

Really? In every case? Wow!!!!!

This is why Parenti will never be confused for a real historian! Invention of intent as an explanatory strategy does not allow people to understand either foreign policy making or the operation of ideology within DC circles. I wish we could all conjure up history this way... it seems more fun to have a familiar and easy-going villain!

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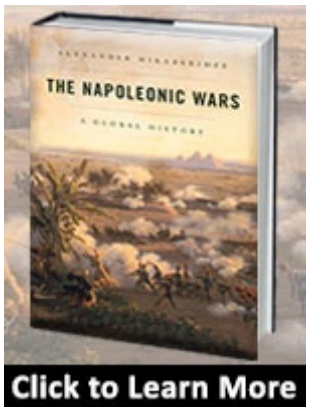

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